



Perspectives on Discipline

Discipline Without Punishment

Dick Grote
Dallas, Texas

Since its invention in a troubled Frito-Lay plant a quarter century ago, a growing number of organizations have replaced their traditional "progressive discipline" systems with a discipline-without-punishment approach.

Like typical approaches, a positive discipline system uses a progressive series of steps to handle everyday problems of absenteeism, bad attitudes, and poor performance. It provides complete and accurate documentation. But instead of using a "criminal justice" mentality and punishing employees for their misdeeds with reprimands and unpaid suspensions, this system requires employees to take personal responsibility for their own behavior and to make real decisions about their own careers.

"Discipline Without Punishment" Mechanics

The first two steps of the Discipline Without Punishment system, Reminder 1 and Reminder 2, closely parallel the verbal reprimand and written warning of traditional approaches. But the terminology change reflects more than mere semantic sleight of hand. Changing the names of the initial steps from oral warnings and written reprimands

to Reminders 1 and 2 eliminates the inappropriate focus on the method of documentation. Instead of warnings about the consequence of further mischief, the employee is instead reminded of what the company expects and—more important—of his or her responsibility to deliver the goods and do what he or she is being paid to do.

The greatest difference between the two approaches lies in the final step: the **Decision-Making Leave**. The employee is suspended for a day and told that he or she must use this time to make a final decision: either to solve the immediate problem and make a "total performance commitment" to fully acceptable performance in every area of the job, or to resign and seek more satisfying employment elsewhere. But there's no punishment involved. The individual receives full pay for the decision-making leave day to demonstrate the company's good-faith desire to see the employee change and stay. The employee is paid, but is also formally notified that if another problem arises, he or she will be terminated.

Why Suspend? Why Pay?

A suspension from work—paid or unpaid, one day or several—is by far the most effective final-step strategy. It provides a cooling-off period and clearly communicates the seriousness of the issue. It allows time to think, previews unemployment, and sends a strong message about management's resolve to maintain high standards. Finally—and perhaps most important—a suspension is almost universally accepted by arbitrators as "sufficient notice."

But why pay the employee for the time away? Isn't that rewarding misbehavior? Won't other employees take advantage of the discipline system to get an extra vacation day?

The rationale for payment is clear. Besides demonstrating the company's good-faith desire to solve problems in a mature, adult way, this approach changes the supervisor's role from adversary to coach. By eliminating money as an issue, the organization reduces anger, hostility, and risk of workplace violence. Most important,

the use of a paid disciplinary suspension makes you look good to a jury.

This responsibility-based approach to discipline has significantly reduced exposure to grievances and EEO complaints resulting from unfair or inconsistent disciplinary action. Once employees formally agree to acceptable performance, it's a lot harder for them to say they didn't understand the rules. If a termination is ever challenged, the use of a decision-making leave increases the probability that an arbitrator will find that the company has done everything it could to rehabilitate the individual.

Why Change?

Traditional progressive discipline approaches never require the employee who is creating problems to take personal responsibility for future good performance. This new, more tough-minded approach requires the person to make a formal commitment to acceptable performance in all areas of his or her job. It solves performance problems promptly and permanently by placing the responsibility for change exactly where it belongs—with the individual.

Traditional progressive discipline is the last remaining vestige of the adversarial, 1930's labor-versus-management attitude in the modern organization. Traditional discipline approaches may indeed convince some problem employees to shape up, others to ship out. But punitive tactics will not produce employees who are genuinely committed to the goals of the enterprise and the policies and rules by which it operates. We may be able to punish people into compliance but we cannot punish people into commitment. And commitment is what today's organizations need. ■

Labor Relations Bulletin Editorial Advisory Panel member Dick Grote is president of Grote Consulting in Dallas, TX (800-734-5475). He is the author of *Discipline Without Punishment* and the developer of the informational Web sites www.PerformanceAppraisal.com and www.PeopleProblems.com.